



Native Grass Series

Switchgrass

Big Bluestem

Little Bluestem

Indiangrass

Eastern Gamagrass

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Fact Sheet 2 Range and Pasture

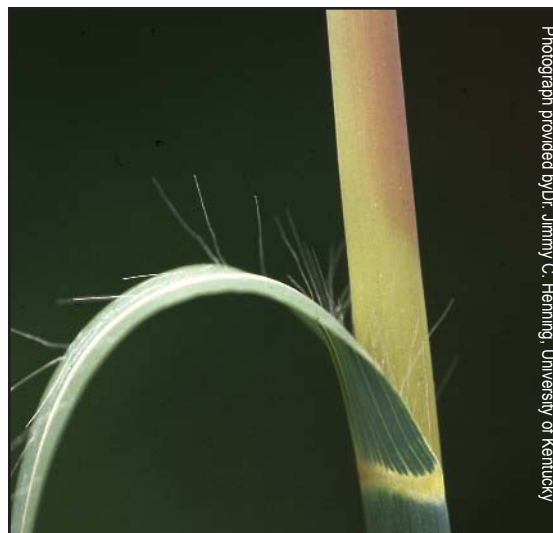
Native Grasses of Louisiana

Fact Sheet

Big Bluestem

Description

Big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*) is sometimes called the "King" of native grasses. It provides excellent yield and requires very low maintenance. It is a perennial grass that occurs in colonies from short rhizomes and grows from 2-6 feet tall. Its extensive root system can extend up to 12 feet into the ground. This gives the plant its extraordinary capacity to withstand drought.



Photograph provided by Dr. Jimmy C. Henning, University of Kentucky

It can be distinguished from other native grasses, even as a young plant, by the long, white hairs on the upper leaf surface near the base of the leaf. The stem is round and usually hairy with a reddish tint at its base. The seed head normally has three finger-like branches shaped like a turkey foot.



Photograph provided by Dr. Jimmy C. Henning, University of Kentucky

Adaptability

Big bluestem is winter hardy and will grow in all areas of the state. It is suited to all soils except those saturated for an extended period of time. Deep, well-drained soils are preferred. The variety 'Kaw' is recommended in Louisiana but has not been extensively tested.



Photograph provided by Dr. Jimmy C. Henning, University of Kentucky

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Establishment

Planting can be done anytime between December and May, when moisture and growing conditions are favorable. The optimum planting time is February 1 - May 15. It should be seeded into a well prepared, firm seedbed that is free of competition from other vegetation. The seeding rate for a monoculture is 7-10 pounds of Pure Live Seed (PLS) per acre. When seeded as a mixture, the rate is adjusted according to the desired percentage. Big bluestem seed is chaffy and will not flow through conventional drills. If

unprocessed seed is used, the drill will need a fluffy seed box. Seeds can be debearded. This process removes much of the chaff and hair, allowing it to be seeded using conventional equipment. There are rangeland drills that can handle debearded seed. Use of a broadcast seeder, broadcasting seed by hand, and aerial seeding are acceptable methods of seeding where conditions permit seed to be placed in contact with mineral soil and where uniform seed distribution can be achieved. It will be necessary to use a cultipacker, press wheels

or similar techniques following broadcast seeding to aid coverage of seed. Seed should be planted $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch deep. Phosphorus and potassium should be applied according to soil test before or at seeding. Nitrogen should not be used at seeding time. Nitrogen fertilization should be delayed until seedlings have reached a height of 4 to 6 inches to prevent excessive use of fertilizer by competing vegetation. If seeding old cropland fields, a soil test is recommended.

Management

Controlling weeds in the establishment year is important. For chemical control of weeds, label rates should be understood and strictly followed to prevent seedling mortality. Grazing is not usually recommended in the first year, but a vigorous stand can be grazed late in the year. Graze big bluestem only after it has reached a height of 12 to 14 inches. It should be grazed under a planned grazing system, rotating the animals when grasses are grazed to an average of 6-8 inches height. Big bluestem can be grazed continuously as long as a minimum height of 8-12 inches is maintained. Big bluestem can benefit from periodic burning, depending on its general condition and vigor. Burning can stimulate growth by reducing unwanted competition from weedy plants and removing excess plant residue. Avoid clipping or grazing big bluestem 30 days before the first frost.

Uses

Big bluestem is a good choice for erosion control plantings on sites with moderately well drained soils. Birds and mammals use big bluestem for nesting and escape cover in summer and winter. Big bluestem is one of the most palatable warm season grasses and is preferred by livestock. Big bluestem can also be used for field borders and buffer strips.

Where To Get Help

For more information about big bluestem, contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service office or visit following websites:
<http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov>
<http://www.la.nrcs.usda.gov>



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